



What Is the Alabama Board of Nursing?

The Alabama Board of Nursing is established by the Legislature to license qualified nurses in Alabama, to ensure quality educational preparation for all prospective nurses, and to enforce the Nurse Practice Act and the ABN Administrative Code. Currently, more than 101,000 individuals are licensed to practice nursing in the state, making nurses the largest population of professionals regulated by a single licensing board in Alabama.

The Board strives daily to improve processes, to fulfill its mission of protecting the public, while eliminating unnecessary impediments to practice by competent registered nurses (RNs), licensed practical nurses (LPNs), and advanced practice nurses. Toward this end, the Board routinely applies a formal Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process to substantially all agency operations, seeking to improve efficiency and eliminate potential failures.

Benefits of Licensing Professionals

Those that require formal education for entry to practice (physicians, dentists, nurses, attorneys, etc.) are necessarily licensed and regulated, to protect the public from the potential for serious harm. These professions are best regulated by members of the professions themselves, as, for instance only doctors are competent to evaluate medical practice, lawyers to evaluate legal practice, and nurses nursing practice. However, it is perfectly appropriate to include public or consumer members on professional licensing boards, as these private citizens bring unique perspectives to deliberations and decision-making.

A “buyer beware” approach to allowing consumers access to the market may be appropriate for some occupations, but the educated professions must be regulated. Consumers of such services as healthcare and legal services are not able to evaluate the qualifications in these professional fields and would be disadvantaged by a pure market approach.

Ensuring Best Practices

The ABN remains active in the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), the Federal Association of Regulatory Boards (FARB), the Council on Licensure, Enforcement, and Regulation (CLEAR), the Alabama Rural Health Action Coalition (ALHAC), and the Alabama Association of Regulatory Boards (AARB), encouraging Board members and staff to participate



fully and to access the vast resources available through these organizations. By staying current on best practices in nursing, healthcare, and regulation, the Board enables itself to adapt to the changing environment of healthcare and licensing nationally.

Developing Nursing Leadership

Within the mandate of protecting the public, the Alabama Board of Nursing is currently working to establish the Nursing Leadership Institute, designed around six core leadership competencies - effective communication, conflict resolution, proficiency in nursing regulation, collaboration, critical thinking, and innovative leadership.

Effective nursing leaders constructively influence any patient care setting, to promote a thriving healthcare environment. Developing strong leaders throughout the state will serve the mission of the Board by expanding public protection through professional development.

The Leadership Institute will offer courses targeted to four levels of nursing leadership – charge nurses, nurse managers, nursing directors and chief nursing officers. The courses will be offered online and via live classes at the ABN in Montgomery and will be available to any licensee who wishes to develop his or her professional abilities, to the benefit of all Alabamians.

Communication and Public Education

Since 2013, the Board and Board staff have undertaken the expansion and enhancement of communication between the Board, its licensees, and the public, in service of the core mission of public protection. Since that time, the ABN has taken a proactive approach to reaching out to relevant parties, in several ways:

ABN on Social Media

The agency has active profiles on Facebook and Twitter, allowing us to communicate directly and efficiently with both nurses and the public. The Board currently has more than 11,000 followers on these two platforms.

Newsletters

In 2014, Board staff instituted quarterly publication of an ABN Newsletter (*ABN Insights*), which provides a forum for sharing background and rationale for proposed changes to Board rules, as well as information relating to nursing practice and developments in Alabama nursing



regulation. *ABN Insights* is produced internally and distributed, via social media and list serve messages, to all licensees.

The Alabama Nursing Resource Center

In 2016, the Board established the Alabama Nursing Resource Center (ANRC), as a component of the ABN website. The ANRC provides the public and licensees with access to extensive information relating to nursing, emerging national and international health concerns, and to health literacy and maintenance, in addition to serving as the Board's central access point for continuing education courses offered by the ABN and external providers. Throughout the existence of the ANRC, the Board has promoted the Center aggressively, to encourage both public and licensee usage of the many resources available here.

Active Collaboration with Stakeholders

The Board takes an active approach to establishing Advisory Councils, to ensure that the views of the nursing and healthcare communities are always considered, when the Board makes decisions that affect delivery of care. At present, several Advisory Councils are meeting at regular intervals and positively influencing decisions relating to advanced practice nursing, leadership and professional development for nurses, and basic nursing education. The Board will continue to establish appropriate Advisory Councils, as need dictates.

Development of Professional and Regulatory Resource Materials

To assist licensees in complying with professional and regulatory requirements, the Board continuously develops a wide array of resources for nurses. These include easy-to-read scope of practice models, grid-based crosswalks for compliance with professional standards, and numerous other general and specific documents to ensure that licensees have access to the most accurate and current information, when making decisions about daily practice. All resource materials are easily accessed through the Board's website.



Reducing Regulatory Barriers

Licensing and Nursing Practice

Joining the Nurse Licensure Compact

In 2019, the Board successfully advocated for passage of legislation allowing Alabama to join the Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC). Alabama Act No. 2019-102, sponsored by Senator Greg Reed and Representative April Weaver, was signed into law by Governor Ivey on May 6, 2019. This historic legislation, the most impactful for nursing in at least a generation, will permit thousands of Alabama nurses to freely practice in more than 30 states, using an Alabama multistate license. The Board presently is engaged in the implementation phase of the Compact, with official entry set for January 1, 2020. The Board also has joined NCSBN's national license verification system (NURSYS). NURSYS participation facilitates open communication between Alabama and other jurisdictions relating to license status, regulatory best practices, and emerging regulatory data.

Online Applications

The Alabama Board of Nursing has long been at the front of the line when it comes to licensure processes. All nurses in Alabama today obtain their licenses by applying online. The ABN remains committed to easing the process for qualified nurses to enter the workforce as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Rapid Approval for Qualified Applicants

By streamlining the process for licensure by endorsement (obtaining a nursing license based on the nurse's valid license in another state), the ABN processes complete applications for qualified nurses in an average of 1.2 days.

Combatting License Fraud

In response to confirmed reports of imposter nurses working in Alabama, the Board redesigned its licensing process, eliminated license cards and, created a new permanent CE card. CE card allows nurses to continue recording their continuing education credits, while recognizing that licenses are valid, requiring no card to verify. Elimination of license cards is facilitated by the Board's online licensure process, as well as the various card-free license verification process. This process produced concrete results, ensuring that employers and consumers have real-time access to valid licensing data for Alabama nurses. The Board provides licensing verification



through both the Subscription Service, which uses PUSH technology to deliver accurate data to employers relating to changes in the license status of nurses they employ, and through License Lookup, a free online search tool that allows any user to obtain credible, primary source validation of a nurse's license.

Retired Licenses

In response to the older workforce who no longer practice the Board created the retired license category. Originally this retired license status required reduced renewal fees every two years to remain listed as retired. The Board recognized this as cumbersome to older nurses who had no intention of re-entering the workforce and adopted new rules eliminating the retirement fee altogether and allowing a retired license to remain retired without renewal, until the nurse sought reinstatement.

Expanding Practice for LPNs

The Board has observed that many facilities underutilize LPNs, due to a lack of clarity regarding scope of practice for these nurses. Accordingly, the Board called together nurse executives from around the state to discuss this issue. This resulted in significant easing of restrictions on LPN practice under certain circumstances. Those changes took effect during 2019, signaling a major step forward for LPNs and their patients.

Responding to Natural Disasters

Temporary Permit for Nurses Responding to Disaster Circumstances

In 2017, the Board created a process that allows nurses from states where a disaster occurs to obtain a Disaster Temporary Permit. This permit is valid for 90 days and enables out-of-state nurses to continue to provide care to patients who are transferred out of disaster zones into Alabama, without submitting to the full licensure process. In addition, nurses who are personally displaced due to hurricanes and other disasters would be able to work and support their families in Alabama for up to 90 days, while either relocating permanently or preparing to return home.

Facility Emergency Plans Activated as a Result of Public Health Emergencies

In May 2018, the Board proposed two new provisions relating to the application of licensure requirements under emergent circumstances. The first (ABN Administrative Code Section 610-X-4-.16(6)) stipulates that, when a facility activates its Emergency Plan in response to a public health emergency, licensed nurses and advanced practice nurses are permitted to act within the



"alternative standards of care delivery" and scope of practice authorized by the Governor's Proclamation and the Emergency Plan. The nurses and APRNs are still required to adhere to their scope of practice, education, training, and certification. This change was made to allow hospitals and other facilities to respond quickly to outbreaks of disease and other public health threats, without focusing unnecessarily on some Board rules that apply in ordinary circumstances.

Facility Emergency Plans Activated as a Result of Community Disaster

The second rule change relating to emergent circumstances (ABN Administrative Code Section 610-X-4-.16(7)) allows nurses and APRNs who are working in facilities that have activated their Emergency Plans in response to a community emergency to practice according to each Emergency Plan's specific clinical models. This change allows facilities to respond more easily to immediate events (e.g.: a tour bus crash or mass shooting), by reassigning nurses and APRNs between departments, without focusing unduly on the specific departments or specialties where licensees otherwise would be required to practice. An additional change within this rule clarifies that CRNPs and CNMs may provide emergency treatment (subject to scope of practice, education, training, and certification) to patients within the area of the community disaster, even outside of an active collaboration.

Military

Military Medic-to-LPN Bridge Program

In an effort to ease the transition for members of the military into civilian life, the ABN approved a bridge curriculum for the Alabama Community College System (ACCS). This curriculum allows experienced military medics to augment their experience through an accelerated nursing education program. After completing the curriculum, these students are eligible to apply for Alabama LPN licensure. Currently, the curriculum is administered at Beville State Community College.



Efficient Licensure for Military Families

The Board has approved new rules, consistent with the Military Family Jobs Opportunity Act, which provide for accelerated licensure for qualified spouses of military personnel. Under these rules, a military spouse who holds a valid nursing license in another state with licensure requirements substantially the same as Alabama's is able to receive an initial Alabama license at no cost. The rules further provide a process that allows those military spouses whose licenses come from states that are not compliant with Alabama licensing requirements to practice in the state for 180 days under a temporary permit, while meeting the additional requirements for licensure.

No Lapse for Alabama Nurses Who are Actively Deployed

The Board recently amended its rules, to guarantee that no military nurse's Alabama license will lapse, if the nurse is actively deployed and unable to renew. All the nurse has to do is provide advanced notification and documentation of his or her deployment to the Board.

Advanced Practice

The Nurse Practice Act requires all Alabama Certified Registered Nurse Practitioners (CRNPs) and Certified Nurse Midwives (CNMs) to practice in collaboration with an Alabama-licensed physician. The collaborative practice model creates many difficulties for CRNPs, CNMs, and Alabama patients, but the ABN has led the effort to expand practice for these nurses and, most importantly, healthcare access for their patients, on several fronts:

Fast Track Approval for CRNPs and CNMs

In 2015, the ABN and the Alabama Board of Medical Examiners redesigned the approval process for collaborative practice applicants, establishing a "fast track" roster for those collaborative practices that comply with established conventional practice models. Where previously, the two boards were required to review and approve each collaborative practice application, under the new process, the vast majority of applications are fast-tracked. This fast track roster allows nurses to achieve full approval more quickly and patients to receive the care they need.



Expanded Protocols for CRNPs

Recognizing the relative skill levels of nurse practitioners, the ABN and the Board of Medical Examiners have worked to develop expanded treatment protocols, which comport with their specific areas of practice. These protocols allow the CRNPs to practice to a fuller scope of practice and to perform skills that previously required direct approval by the two boards. The new protocols have streamlined the approval process and access to competent care throughout the state.

Novice-to-Expert Track for Nurses in Collaborative Practice

The ABN led the effort to acknowledge the preparation of experienced nurse practitioners and nurse midwives, by establishing new rules, which allow nurses with enough experience to move past onerous requirements for on-site collaboration with physicians. Thousands of Alabama nurses and patients have benefitted from this change, which enables experienced advanced practice nurses to practice more freely.

Streamlining Prescribing Formularies for CRNPs and CNMs

CRNPs and CNMs in collaborative practice are granted authority to prescribe legend drugs for maintenance of patient health. Previously, the nurse would apply for permission to prescribe, according to a Standard Formulary, with the option of adding a Specialty Formulary, for drugs specific to the nurse's area of practice. In 2016, in recognition of the fact that all relevant drugs were classified together as legend drugs, the ABN and the Board of Medical Examiners eliminated the Specialty Formulary, incorporating all specialty drugs as options on the Standard Formulary. This process reduces paperwork for advanced practice nurses, while ensuring the protection of their patients.

Creating Limited and Flex Protocols for the CRNP

CRNPs in Alabama practice according to many different practice models, some of which may not require the nurse to practice to his or her full scope. Recognizing the existence of these exceptions, the Board has begun developing limited protocols, specifically for collaborative practices that are highly specialized and may use only one aspect of the education and training (e.g.: comprehensive physicals for Medicare Advantage participants and increased FTE allowances for long-term care). These new protocols lessen certain restrictions, such as MD-to-CRNP ratios, and can reduce cost significantly. In addition, the new Flex/PRN protocol allows for CRNPs to participate in flex pools under a collaborative agreement, although the individual nurse may be working only when the needs of the employer demand it, such as a pregnancy or illness involving a full-time CRNP. Prior to this change, employers did not have flexibility to accommodate medical events or long-term absences within their staffs.



Clarifying Scope and Standards of Practice for CRNAs

Learning of confusion among facility administrators regarding appropriate scope and standards for Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists, the Board revised its rules to clarify that CRNAs practice according to scope, standards, and guideline documents established by the National Association of Nurse Anesthetists, provided that those documents do not conflict with Alabama law. This effort has drawn praise from CRNAs and facility staff alike, as it increases access to necessary anesthesia care for patients throughout the state.

Establishing CNS Independent Contract Framework

For decades, Alabama's more than 1,300 Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs) have been underutilized and misunderstood by employers in Alabama. In an effort to educate the public and healthcare facilities about the scope and possibilities for CNS practice, the ABN has approved a CNS independent contract framework, to guide independent nursing service contract formation. The purpose of this undertaking is to encourage and broaden utilization of these highly educated and qualified advanced practice nurses, increasing quality of and access to care for all Alabama citizens.

The Loan Repayment Program for Advanced Practice Nursing

In 2016, the Board worked with the Alabama Legislature to establish a program to offer education loans to candidates for advanced practice who agree to work in rural areas of the state following graduation. Following successful implementation of that program, the Board saw an opportunity to expand the program and allow very recent graduates to apply for the loans. This will allow the Board to place more experienced providers in these areas of critical need. Fortunately, the Legislature saw the merit of this approach and approved the expansion during the 2019 Regular Legislative Session. The Board currently is implementing rules to support this valuable change for our citizens.



Nursing Education

One of the Board’s primary legislative mandates is approval and review of nursing education programs. The majority of Alabama’s nursing education programs continue to do an excellent job of preparing future nurses to deliver the highest standards of care to Alabama patients. However, over the years, a few programs have failed to comply with education standards. To remedy these gaps in instructional quality, the Board empaneled a team to review standards and ensure that prospective nurses have the best possible foundation for the future. The culmination of this effort is a completely revamped chapter on nursing education rules. These rules adhere to national best practices, including requiring all programs in the state to obtain national accreditation by 2022.

Continuing Education

Alabama patients benefit when nurses are informed about the most current trends in healthcare. Nurses providing care to Alabama patients are required to document 24 hours of continuing education (CE) every two years, prior to renewing their licenses. The ABN remains committed to ensuring nurses adequate access to high-quality continuing education and has worked to expand convenience and access by:

Repeat Credit for ABN Mandatory Class

For years, the Board has required new licensees to take a free four-hour basic CE course (commonly referred to as the “Mandatory Class”), prior to their first license renewal. However, the rules restricted future credit for retaking the course to specific sections of the course that had been updated since the previous viewing. Understanding that all nurses may wish to refresh their knowledge bases, the Board revised the CE requirement in 2017, allowing each licensee to complete the Mandatory Class for full credit once in each two-year renewal cycle.

Online Upload of CE Credits

In the past, nurses were required to supply hard-copy documentation of their CE credits to the Board. Understanding that this presented a logistical and financial problem for many licensees, the Board established an online CE record for every licensee. Using the My Profile portal on the Board’s website, each Alabama nurse may upload his or her CE credits, reducing needless paperwork and expense, for both the licensees and the Board.



Providing Free CE to Alabama Licensees

The Board has established an Education Services team, which internally develops relevant CE classes and provides them, at no cost, to Alabama nurses. At present, the Board offers over 25 hours of CE credits, which are easily accessible for all licensees, through the “My Profile” portal on the Board’s website. Development and production of new CE courses, as well as the review and revision of existing courses, occurs continuously.

Expanding the CE Earning Period

Prior to 2019, nurses were allowed to earn continuing education toward the next renewal beginning January 1 of the license period, regardless of when they had actually renewed their licenses during the Fall Renewal period. This was necessary before the Board established its automated licensing system. Recognizing the fundamental unfairness of this restriction under modern circumstances, the ABN altered its rules, so that, now, nurses may begin earning CE credit the day after they renew.



Protecting Alabamians

Competent Investigations and Fair Application of Discipline When Necessary

The primary role of the ABN's Legal Division is to investigate complaints related to the Board's licensees and applicants for licensure, and to prosecute disciplinary actions when those complaints are substantiated. In addition, the Legal Division supports the Board and its employees by providing legal advice to the Board and representing the Board in litigation. The Legal Division does not provide legal advice to licensees or applicants for licensure. It exists to protect Alabama patients, while observing appropriate legal and Constitutional protections for Alabama nurses.

The Voluntary Disciplinary Alternative Program (VDAP)

The Voluntary Disciplinary Alternative Program (VDAP) is a program authorized by the Alabama Legislature to promote early identification, intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation of any registered nurse, licensed practical nurse, or applicant issued a valid temporary permit for licensure whose competence is found to be impaired or compromised because of the use or abuse of drugs, alcohol, controlled substances, chemicals, or other substances or as a result of a physical or mental condition rendering the person unable to meet the standards of the nursing profession. The program has been in existence since 1994.

VDAP is a program intended for nurses who admit readily to a problem with alcohol and/or drugs or a mental or physical disorder that may cause the nurse to be unable to meet the standards for the nursing profession. VDAP is not disciplinary action and there is no discipline associated with the nurse's license, following completion of the program.

To increase participation and maintain safe nursing practice, the Board launched an ongoing campaign to promote the VDAP program in 2017. The campaign includes the internal production of promotional materials and many communications directed to licensees and the public – including distribution via the *ABN Insights* newsletter, promotion of the program via social media and agency list serve emails, and advertising placed in external nursing newsletters. Since the beginning of the campaign, VDAP enrollment has increased by more than 100%, to the benefit of both licensees and the public.